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**Review of The Robotic Imaginary: The Human and the Price of Dehumanized Labor by
Jennifer Rhee**

Schnepf, J.D.

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Jennifer Rhee, *The Robotic Imaginary: The Human and the Price of Dehumanized Labor* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2018), 240 pp.

Reviewed by **J. D. Schnepf**, Princeton University

Given the prevalence of voice-activated digital assistants such as iPhone's Siri and Amazon's Alexa, and the popularity of films such as Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* and Spike Jonze's *Her*, one might suppose that twenty-first-century culture has a fembot fixation or, at the very least, an interest in seeing new technology assume the gendered stereotype of docile female servitude. In *The Robotic Imaginary: The Human and The Price of Dehumanized Labor*, Jennifer Rhee offers an urgent feminist critique of the fembot figure and representations of robotics more broadly across the technosciences and literary, cinematic, and digital cultural forms of the twentieth and twenty-first century. Rhee locates the "robotic imaginary"—her term to index the set of "shifting inscriptions of humanness and dehumanizing erasures evoked by robots"—within two discourses: one that devalues reproductive labor under late capitalism and another that defamiliarizes enemy life in the colonial present (5). Dehumanization, she argues, is part and parcel of "the history of robotics and its various inscriptions and erasures of the human" (1). Rhee tracks the inelastic parameters of the human subject inherited from Enlightenment thinkers, pointing out the gendered and racialized assumptions that inform this model, to ask of the robotic imaginary: Who gets excluded from the concept of the human? Who gets to claim full humanity?

These questions are familiar ones, not just for those interested in robotics in contemporary culture but for anyone thinking within the intellectual traditions that theorize the posthuman and the nonhuman. Here Rhee engages a diverse group of scholars including Diana Fuss, Pheng Cheah, Sylvia Wynter, José Muñoz, and Lucy Suchman. Of primary importance to her argument, though, is Édouard Glissant's proposition that the analytic concept of the human relies too heavily on the need to be transparent. Freed of the institutional and discursive burdens of knowability, he insists, what is human ought to be regarded as opaque and unfamiliar instead. Building on Glissant's claim allows Rhee to position her study as a clear "reject[ion of] the givenness of the human, both as a self-evident concept and as that which is knowable and recognizable in another" (3).

At its best, then, the robotic imaginary has the potential to reconfigure a new future for the human outside of identificatory relations, although, as Rhee shows, it often fails to live up to this possibility, doubling down on its anthropomorphic capacities to churn out the same old vision of the human instead. The book's opening lays out a brief history of this imaginary, taking readers from the robot's twentieth-century literary

origins in Karel Čapek's 1920 play *R. U. R. (Rossum's Universal Robots)* to the robotic arts and sciences of the present to reveal the exclusionary logic of dehumanization at work. Rhee singles out Alan Turing's 1950 "Computing Machinery and Intelligence" for special attention, and rightly so: widely regarded as a founding text of the field of AI, the essay has been fodder for N. Katherine Hayles, Ned Schantz, and Tyler Curtain, among others, who have expertly deconstructed how the mathematician deployed the norms of gender and sexuality to establish his disembodied fantasy of intelligent machinery. Rhee's treatment of Turing's text is indeed illuminating. Not only does she note the essay's refusal to police human identity, but she also keeps with critical interest in its complex engagement with gender and sexuality to point out a passage where Turing muses that the AI of the future ought to be built to approximate a child's mind. Enrolling AI in a course of education "much the same as for the human child," Turing believed, could be the key to raising artificial intelligence that grows to be indistinguishable from the human mind of an adult. Rhee contends that it is the devalued feminized reproductive labor embedded within this proposal—"the work of raising, educating, and caring for another person"—that has been central to the robotic imagination all along (32).

This capacity for caring—alongside thinking, feeling, and dying—make up the anthropomorphic paradigms that organize the book into chapters. Moreover, each paradigm is propped up by a mode of work that often goes unacknowledged: care labor, domestic labor, emotional labor, and drone labor, respectively. As this division of topics suggests, the first three chapters share a common interest in the labor of social reproduction. Across them, Rhee looks to several texts, including *Galatea 2.2*, *The Stepford Wives*, and *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, to make the case that devaluation of this mode of work and the dehumanization of the gendered robots that perform it go hand in hand.

Drone labor appears to function quite differently. Rhee underscores this difference, pointing out that drone operators must turn away from feminized forms of reproductive labor that call for care and compassion and turn toward the racial dehumanization of those they are hired to kill:

While robots have been imagined as carers, servants, and companions for humans, drones highlight just which humans have been imagined to be the beneficiaries of these subservient AIs and robots and their reproductive labor, and just which humans have been imagined to be disposable, both in their replacement by robot workers and their deaths by drone. (134)

Although Rhee goes on to elucidate how a good deal of drone art advocates for a human relation approximating Glissant's notion of opacity, it is productive, at this juncture, to take stock of the book's overall organization. In its structural progression

from the work of nurturing to that of killing, I'd argue that the story *The Robotic Imaginary* really tells is one of the steady unfolding of US biopower through its conscription of citizens to work on behalf of the health of the nation-state both at home and abroad. Looking back at those domesticated "carers, servants, and companions" populating the book's first three chapters, it becomes clear that those robotic helpmates are engaged in the biopolitical work of reproducing and managing life at home. The shift to drone labor that comes at the end of Rhee's book, then, can be understood best as the shift in focus from that biopolitical work of social reproduction to the necropolitical work of killing the state's racialized enemies abroad—two modes of work that together maintain the ongoing project of US empire in the twenty-first century.

To be sure, this critical restatement puts *The Robotic Imaginary's* agenda and its engagement with the US geopolitical context in stronger terms than Rhee does herself, but the array of careful readings pertaining specifically to the cultures of US imperialism and the book's narrative arc seems to warrant it. This move also underscores that drones don't "highlight" who gets hurt and who gets helped given our existing robotic imaginaries; they violently cleave the world's human population into those who live and those who die at the discretion of the US state. Even more crucially, the militarized drone's lethal capacities continue unabated because they are entirely enmeshed with the biopolitical logic of social reproduction on behalf of the state. Precision drone strikes, Grégoire Chamayou explains, constitute a humanitarian form of warfare, the thinking goes, because the drone's refined targeting capabilities hypothetically reduce the number of collateral deaths. So for the Trump administration, as for the Obama and Bush administrations before it, drone work *is* a form of care work. In this sense, such domesticated robot carers as Joseph Weizenbaum's ELIZA, Richard Powers's Helen, and Jonze's Samantha from the first chapter might have more in common with the militarized drones currently hovering over Iran, Afghanistan, Somalia, and Yemen than Rhee's argument allows.

One generative direction for future study then would draw the work of social reproduction that is the focus of the first three quarters of the book into alignment with the drone labor that makes up its last quarter. Doing so would address the logic of humanitarianism that courses through the US security state's current reliance on robotic technologies to manage the biopolitics of everything from mass shootings to migration to disaster rescue. Plus, in tracking the funding structures of contemporary robotics technologies back to the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), Rhee makes the case that DARPA is an underexamined patron of postwar America's speculative and robotic arts. These militaristic robot fantasies regularly assume a material presence as convenient technologies in our daily lives, especially moving into the domestic sphere to provide basic care services such as loading the dishwasher or

vacuuming the living room. By convincingly linking the militaristic with the domestic, and locating robotic care and killing under the banners of devalued labor and racial dehumanization, *The Robotic Imaginary* has indisputably set the terms for research into the future of robotics and its cultural forms as they make their way into the home.